

Becoming a “Tough Target” for Abuse

People with developmental disabilities are more likely than people without disabilities to become victims of crime. According to some studies, the rates can be 4-10 more likely that someone with a developmental disability is abused than a peer without a disability. To learn more about this issue and find more resources for people who may have become victims, please visit our national chapter’s National Center on Criminal Justice and Disability at <https://www.thearc.org/NCCJD>

It is incredibly important to be a “tough target” for abuse, or to help your loved one with a disability become a “tough target,” which can help prevent abusers from targeting yourself or your loved one, and prevent abuse from occurring even if someone is targeted.

Tips for Understanding Abuse

Remember the following to help you prepare for tackling this idea and starting a conversation.

- Abusers are usually not strangers, but people in trust relationships with your loved one already
- Abuse usually involves secrecy and giving of gifts to build trust before abuse begins
- Abuse may not seem bad or physically feel bad in some cases, so avoid describing it with those terms
- Abusers are good at shaming people into making them believe that telling about the abuse would bring harm to someone else
- Abusers could be paid staff, family, family friends, or peers
- Allow yourself to acknowledge that this is scary, but that you should come up with a plan that makes everyone feel empowered

Tips for Hiring Staff

If you are hiring anyone to help you or your loved one with a disability, take the following precautions. They cannot prevent everything, but they are a good way to start.

- Conduct a state and federal background check, including a check of the sex offender registry in Virginia and nationally. People must be caught and convicted to be here, but checking is still valuable.
- Only hire people you have only met face to face to get a feel for the person.
- Check references diligently. Ask if they would trust this person with someone vulnerable or hire them again.
- Do a check of social media, like Facebook, Instagram, and other sites to see if the person has an online persona that makes you comfortable.
- If you’re a parent/caregiver, observe the interactions between the staff person and your loved one. Be on the lookout for anything odd (e.g., whispering, signs of discomfort, asking you to leave and give private time)
- If you’re a parent/caregiver, plan periodic surprise visits when you come home early or stay around for the time the staff is there, if possible, to get a good sense of how things work when you are not usually there.

Strategies for Making Yourself or Others a Tough Target

These strategies are key for making sure you or your loved one are less likely to be a target for abuse and are more likely to resist abuse.

- Think about this issue often, like an ongoing conversation, not a serious one-time talk. Keep it light, but serious and see opportunities to discuss the issue in daily life. For example, if your loved one joins a new sports team or starts at a new school, remind them of what type of touch is okay and when.
- Use proper terms for body parts. People should be able to identify areas on them that were touched or hurt very clearly, and feel comfortable knowing and understanding their bodies.
- Have developmentally appropriate sexual education. Everyone has hormones and changing bodies at some point. Find ways to have open conversations about bodies, what is allowed when and with whom, and what happens in a loving relationship. If your loved one is school aged, ask about making this part of their IEP.
 - <https://www.easeeducates.org/>
 - <https://www.respectability.org/resources/sexual-education-resources/>
- Have body rules. Describe safe and unsafe ways to touch your body and be touched. Name the people who can touch you or your loved one (e.g., doctor only when someone else is present). If your loved one is too young for a sexual relationship, help them understand there is never a time when they should touch anyone else's private areas.
- Never allow secrets. Be clear on who safe people are for any questions or concerns. If you or your loved one will be away (e.g., at camp), think and talk about the specific people there who are always safe.
 - Know the difference between surprises and secrets. A surprise is good news you'll tell someone soon. A secret is something you wouldn't tell anyone, or that would make them sad.
- If you're a trusted adult, ensure your loved one knows that they will never get in trouble just for telling the truth.
- If someone comes to you, believe them. If someone says something that concerns you, take their word for it. Never risk undermining that trust or their willingness to open up.
- Call for help. People with developmental disabilities are often not given the same credence as other assault victims for a number of reasons, including challenges with offering formal testimony and possible inconsistencies in relating events over and over again. If you feel concerned about something that happened or have any reason to suspect abuse, ask that a team work together to do an interview a single time. Ask for someone with developmental disability expertise to conduct the interview.
 - **Adult Protective Services** for people 18+ years old and **Child Protective Services** for minors
 - Arlington- (703) 228-1700
 - Alexandria- (703) 746-5700
 - Fairfax- (703) 324-7450
 - Adult 24-Hour Hotline- (888) 832-3858
 - Child 24-Hour Hotline- (804) 786-8536
 - **Police**- 911 and ask for an officer trained to work with people with developmental disabilities
 - **Arlington County**- ask about Restorative Justice, <https://www.restorativearlington.org/>